

Love at the heart of suffering

Statues of St. Francis of Assisi are often found in gardens where the concrete saint is gingerly fingering a stone dove in one hand and a basin of bird-bath-water in the other. Many movies and books about St. Francis express his fondness for nature and the beauty of creation. While there is truth in all of this, at the heart of Francis' faith was his love of the Crucified Christ.

Francis of Assisi was a man who endured great suffering and hardship. He spent a year in a dark, dank cell in Perugia after being captured in battle. During this time he became very ill and was not released until his father paid his ransom. Later, upon learning of his son's desire to forsake the family business and follow Christ, his father beat him and locked him in the family basement. Later in life, Francis would suffer from a painful eye condition made worse by the barbaric treatment of the times. If all this was not enough, he would bear the stigmata, the nail marks of the Crucifixion in his hands and feet. The saint that we so often think of just being gentle man, patron saint of animals, has so much more to teach us than simply a love of creation.



At this time of the year, as we walk with Jesus on his journey to the cross on Good Friday and then rejoice at his resurrection on Easter Day, it is good for us to remember the depth of suffering that Jesus experienced. If we don't do this, then we run the risk of seeing the true good news of the cross, that even in the darkest of places, God is still present.

Jesus, like any other human, would have been doing his utmost to avoid the agony that he was going to face. He would have battled with what we all know so well – the powerful human instinct to preserve ourselves and avoid pain and conflict. Being the Son of God did not immunise Jesus against the struggle of sacrifice. But in this place of suffering, love triumphs gloriously. Jesus places himself and his future into the hands of God and walks into the darkness. Three days later, the whole world could see that nothing, not even the cruellest of situations or death, could stop love from winning. Jesus was not abandoned by God, however much he feared this. Instead God had walked into the pain and mess of the cross and the grave with him and brought him out on the other side into a place of hope and redemption.

This is what shaped Francis' life and made him the man that inspired so many people. Like Francis, we will all encounter suffering in our walk with Christ. Like him, we should learn that suffering is never a sign of God's absence. Rather, we can come to see with St. Francis of Assisi that God works through our suffering, teaching us to love, to trust, and to bear our burden with humility and patience. This Easter, may we know the truth of this, that the risen Lord Jesus Christ shows us that we are never abandoned, that God is always with us, loving us, guiding us, weeping with us, laughing with us.

Prayer of St Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.